

IPAA Talks: Staging Ceremony

Saturday, June 14th 2014 – Toronto, ON



Facilitator: Jill Carter

Panel: Monique Mojica, Jack D'Hondt, Norma Araiza, Cole Alvis

Jill Carter gives the Opening Prayer and Acknowledgement of the land. Jill opens the floor to the panelists.

Monique Mojica: *Kuna and Rappahonic*, adopted into Cayuga Bear Clan Six Nations. She is an actor and playwright, who began as a dancer. Her grounding in performance goes back to the body, core of the gestures and language. She is the founder and AD of the Chocolate Women Collective – trajectory going back to how we ground ourselves in land, in place, in cosmos, and how stories are told in our cultures.

Jeff D'Hondt: *Mohawk/Delaware*. He works outside the art world, is a recent writer, social worker, and storytelling – both positions involve stories. Ceremonies can be actual ceremonies, sweat lodge, etc., but it can be symbolic like storytelling, healing component to storytelling that facilitate discussion, want people to know that their story is told and respected. I do most of my storytelling by listening

Norma Araiza: *Yacqui*. Norma has spent 25 years in Toronto, acknowledgement of Indigenous people of this land. Working with Atomic Dance Theatre, she grew up with Western training and then found she had indigenous background as a teenager. She

sought out her language and dance from her grandmother. Her Dad is Mexican. Norma has been working in dance theatre for 34 years. She works from her heart; if she has something to say then she works on that.

Cole Alvis: *Irish, English and Métis* heritage. He is an actor, theatre creator, and the Executive Director of IPAA. He is interested in addressing ways to look at indigeneity in performance in a good way. He wants to hear from artists and the way they engage with ceremony in their practice.

Jill: Perhaps, we should begin at the beginning: the questions in my research about ceremony shift slightly but keep recurring: Why here and why now? Why are we addressing these questions at *A Spirit's Face*? What questions came up for you? What manifested?

Jeff: It started very personally; he started a wreck, and could stay that way or move forward. It became a test of faith, getting out of bed, talking to people. The people he lost were people who gave him unconditional love. Lost most of friends and family. In terms of masks, he comes from a place where it is significant and the reserve he comes from there is always reference for that. Masks have always been a part of my life. He has always been afraid of masks – reference to devil, that has always been his thought. He realized he was afraid because he did not understand them so he realized that he feared what he did not understand. By coincidence he happened to write *A Spirit's Face*, so the narrative had to be masks. I was living like a mask. I created this false reality and I was bleeding deliberately. There will always be a barrier there; it's the journey that matters. The last few drafts of the script became a ceremony for him. He got rigid in rehearsal because ceremony changed the script. He did not like changes. There were moments taken from ceremony, moments of silence, moments of confronting, moments of masks. The play itself became a ceremony.

Cole: Fringe first workshopped, there was a privacy conundrum but the relationship and agreement with the community made it possible for them to do this piece. He could see how ceremony was changing the script. The change in reference to ceremony, when Hunter is at the cliff, is new to this draft. There are historical questions – fictional ceremony that Hunter's father created at the cliff.

Jill: Let's start at the beginning. We all throw this word ceremony around, and we all picture the word ceremony in our head. I'd like to ask what the functions of ceremony are for you. For instance, for me, I think of it as a marker and facilitator of permanent transformation.

Monique: The word that comes to mind is transformation. What is the difference between ritual and ceremony? Every day we go through personal rituals, and not all of those are sacred. Making coffee is a ritual but there is a difference. Ceremony contains rituals. There are private ceremonies and shared ceremonies. Not revealing and not transgressing things that are collectively private or collectively held. I think most of the work that I do is healing ceremonies. I write healing ceremonies. Theatre is a heightened

form. One thing I have done consistently is not using medicines – but form shape principals. For Pocahontas and the Blue Spots, the musician/composer was ceremony. She represented the puberty ceremony but we never really enacted a ceremony. She painted herself with red paint. What is important to me about ceremony on stage is that it really is transgressive to plunk it on the stage. In this arena, we are dealing with illusion – there is no real reason for it to be real. Burning sage and sweet grass are not an illusion or ambiance. Theatre has its own spirits – we have to deal with how we cross those paths. The rituals that I follow are outside of actual performance; it is done in preparation for performance before writing, research or performance. It would never be something to have any right to bring into performance. The intent, the gesture is something that is brought on stage. The clearest example that I brought from my own spiritual ceremonial practices is the gesture of making tobacco ties. I tied shoes onto a rope, shoes from a massacre. The character turned them into sacred objects by doing so. It was the gesture and intent, not the actual sacred medicines.

Norma: Ceremony is a way of life. I don't separate it. It is myself as a whole. When I was learning ceremony and my culture, the elders told me that I always needed to recognize where things come from. The collective is an understanding of an event. There are certain things that shouldn't leave that collective. There are always ways to create your own without breaking the rules. I think all my work is very ritualistic. I prep my ceremony before and after performance. I always stay true to myself and my traditions. She normally writes a little about where things come from. For example, the deer; the deer is a very sacred animal. The deer dance is only performed by males and only for a specific ceremony. They told me I was not allowed to perform. So she asked to make her own version. They said yes as long as she recognizes and honors where it comes from. The deer is very important to me. I always ask if things are allowed. There is a lot of preparation before I create. Ceremony is definitely part of who I am.

Jeff: Ceremony is a part of my daily basis, as is ritual. Ritual and ceremony help restore a balance in me. I can't live without ceremony even if I tried. It is very much a part of who I am. It is such an essential part of myself it is hard to talk about it here. Ceremony is always present no matter what I do.

Jill: All of you seem to talk about translating and abstracting ceremony. What actual methodologies have you begun to devise and employ for the public stage? Monique has been talking about the gesturing, can you reveal more?

Monique: Embodiment of time and space. Going to ancient sites to embody stories. The process for knowing how to do that is largely intuitive. It is hard to describe, it is not a methodology or formula. I would rebel against it being formulaic if it were. It is important to make offerings. I had to write an essay for Drew Hayden Taylor and one of the most important things I had to do as an artist is be a receptor – whether it's to allow my body to set free and translate it or if it is my collective who makes an offering and takes that frequency or vibration. For her show *Sideshow Freaks and Circus Injuns*, they visited mounds from Ontario to Mississippi and Alabama. They visited the mounds to reactivate their original purpose to restructure them into performance. Every site we

have been to was led through transformation by snakes, frogs, butterflies, and dragonflies. We could not find the mounds in Virginia – and the buzzard led us down the hill. We could just barely make out the burial mounds. It is a balance; you have to have big ears and big heart. You have to always ask permission within the culture of the spirits. In development of *Chocolate Women Dreams the Milky Way*, the director was saying we are going up to that point but never going over.

Jeff: Ideal in abstractions. I would never portray an actual ceremony. I wrote a healing ceremony but I did not want to create an actual healing ceremony. Before the play starts, there is a moment of silence. Sometimes we need to not talk in order to move forward. It is reference to an actual ceremony (a four day ceremony in which you cannot talk). Getting permission is vital. Some of the imagery here was making a statement. It can be very hard to see some of these images that have an incredible force. A mask is smashed on stage – is it okay that we show this image, is this more harm than good? They were okay with it but it was borderline. You need to explain what you want to do and why you want to do it. It's about collective engagement, find the abstraction for it and talk to the people this abstraction can reach. Abstraction or not, theatre is a powerful thing. It can be healing but can also be harming. I pretend the script is my client, there are certain things I would never say to a client.

Norma: I do not have a methodology but I will share a story from a piece I created. I had a very hard time with menopause. I really wanted to express myself rather than complaining. I sat, cleansed myself, and was in silence. I asked myself to show a sign and let me know what I can do. I started to listen. That's the first thing, listening. I write what comes to me. A story came to me about this grandmother and I followed that. The piece is about how I lived with menopause and my communication with the grandmothers. It became a ritual to open and share myself. Repetition brings me into a trance. It was a part of the ceremony; otherwise there would be a moment where I go somewhere else. Normally it becomes my own ceremony. We take our own elements from ceremonies we know to translate them into something that is very personal.

Monique: I think that's key in every element, gesture, value, principal – before it hits the stage, it needs to pass through some artistic process. Or what's the point? If you don't do that, then you are just recreating a ceremony.

Cole: I am thinking about the flexibility of the nature of the process. As I am coming from an inclusive place, the ASL Interpreters that were integrated into *A Spirit's Face* helped clarify our processes. There are avenues or ways of accessing questions. It comes back often to me about consultation and allowing it to be altered to speak to a specific community.

Audience: Monique you talked briefly about the abstraction of ceremony – to what degree does this abstraction need to be? Can we stage it, how do we negotiate? Does it need to be recognizable?

Monique: Its not one size fits all. Each situation and question is different. Its more than a filter, it is a transformation in itself. It is taking something that is inspired by something in a sacred practice, through an artistic process. If it looks like an original then you haven't done that work.

Jill: You come from a family that is part of that art of distillation.

Monique: Working with a designer that was also a cultural consultant. How do you edit? You need to abstract – three, four levels of abstractions. Based on ways I knew how to work – if you abstract a monologue to movement, that is quite abstract. I do think it exists in Spiderwoman's process because it exists in our culture. It became an intuitive way that was understood. Our culture is in code and in body. Sophistication of abstractions. One symbol has many meanings.

Audience: Jeff talked about theatre as a ceremony in itself. Monique talked about theatres with spirits. Within the confines of traditional theatre, do you think you can call in spirits into the work? You have two characters in a scene that calls in so much spirit into your work within the traditional confines of theatre.

Jeff: Sometimes the simplistic of scenes can have a lot of power – it is clear there is something there. With this one there were moments we brought different spirits in. We were actually seeing some conjuring at certain points. Struggling with this play was okay because they came to help me. Not every play will have that level of spirituality to it, they're all different. That is something you need to deal with very carefully and respectfully. Theatre does really open a door. Theatre is ceremony, even Les Mis. It is incredible ceremony. That is a story of hundreds of people dying. There is incredible spirit behind that and behind many stories. It needs to be addressed very carefully.

Monique: Remember to send them back. Sometimes you have to negotiate with the spirits, give them a feast but don't mess with the lights!